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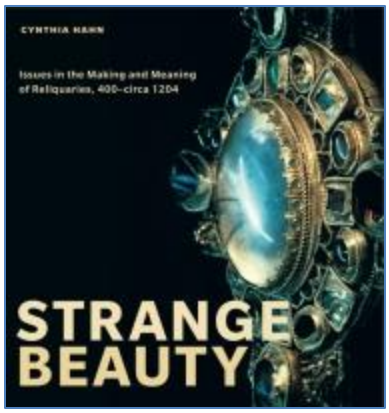

Cynthia Hahn, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400 – circa 1204*. University Park: Penn State University Press, 2012. Pp. 312, 43 color/ 90 black & white illustrations.

Book Review by Elisa A. Foster, Henry Moore Institute, Leeds

The medieval reliquary is a peculiar thing to behold. Both oddly macabre and intensely beautiful, glistening with gems and gold, the outer beauty of the reliquary at once conceals its corporeal remains while alluding to its spiritual presence. What is this 'strange beauty' elicited by reliquaries and how was it understood by the medieval viewer? This is the question the Cynthia Hahn explores in her impressive and beautifully-illustrated contribution to the growing literature on reliquaries, *Strange Beauty: Issues in the Making and Meaning of Reliquaries, 400 – circa 1204* (Penn State University Press, 2012). Hahn attempts to answer this difficult question through a critical blend of primary sources, recent literature on relics and materiality, and literary theory.

Published in hardback in 2012 and paperback in 2013, *Strange Beauty* is counted among the significant monographs on the subject of relics and reliquaries to appear in recent years.[1] Hahn acknowledges that the timing of her publication did not allow her to

[1] For recent publications on reliquaries before Hahn, see, among others, Brigitte Buettner, "From Bones to Stones: Reflections on Jeweled Reliquaries," in *Reliquiare im Mittelalter*, ed. Bruno Reudenbach and Gia

include insights from a groundbreaking exhibition and catalog on reliquaries, *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics and Devotion in Medieval Europe*, held at The Cleveland Museum of Art, The British Museum, and the Walters Art Gallery in 2010 and 2011. While it is unfortunate, but understandable that Hahn could not incorporate this exhibition's research into her book, *Strange Beauty* was itself coordinated with a smaller exhibition on relics called *Objects of Devotion and Desire: Medieval Relic to Contemporary Art* at Hunter College.[2] In some ways, the popularity of the *Treasures of Heaven* exhibition has perhaps overshadowed Hahn's study, and therefore *Strange Beauty* deserves a close revisit.

The issue of representation lies at the heart of Hahn's argument. As representative forms, reliquaries do not visually reflect their inner contents but rather they guide the viewer to understanding the symbolic and historical significance of the relics they contain. Reliquaries are therefore rhetorical. Using terminology adapted from literary theory, Hahn describes how these reliquaries worked as both as formal signs and biblical metaphors to signal of the presence of the holy. It is an intriguing argument, and for the

Toussaint (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2011); Freeman, Charles. *Holy Bones, Holy Dust: How Relics Shaped the History of Medieval Europe* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011); Scott B. Montgomery, *St. Ursula and the Eleven Thousand Virgins of Cologne: Relics, Reliquaries and the Visual Culture of Group Sanctity in Late Medieval Europe*. (New York: Peter Lang, 2010) http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&scope=site&db=nlebk&db=nlabk&AN=809123; Martina Bagnoli, Holger A. Klein, C. Griffith Mann, and James Robinson, eds. *Treasures of Heaven: Saints, Relics, and Devotion in Medieval Europe*. Exh. Cat. Walters Art Museum, Cleveland Museum of Art and The British Museum, 2010. In the same year, see, Karen Eileen Overbey, *Sacral Geographies: Saints, Shrines and Territory in Medieval Ireland* (Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2012); After Hahn, see James Robinson, Lloyd De Beer, and Anna Harnden. *Matter of Faith: An Interdisciplinary Study of Relics and Relic Veneration in the Medieval Period* (London: British Museum, 2014).

[2] Cynthia Hahn, *Objects of Devotion and Desire: Medieval Relic to Contemporary Art* (New York: Hunter College, The Bertha and Karl Leubsdorf Art Gallery, 2011). In addition to these exhibitions, both the Louvre Museum and the Metropolitan Museum of Art have featured reliquaries as part of 2013 temporary exhibitions of the treasuries of the Abbey of Saint Maurice d'Aguane (Louvre Museum, Paris, 14 March to 16 June 2014) and Hildesheim (*Medieval Treasures from Hildesheim* 17 September 2013 – 5 January 2014, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York) respectively.

Stavelot Triptych, Mosan, Belgium, c. 1156–58. 48×66 cm with wings open, The Morgan Library & Museum, New York City. Photo: Wikimedia.

most part, a convincing one. Hahn recognizes the enormous variety of reliquaries and impossibility of writing about all of them. This book therefore focuses on key types — namely portable reliquaries that conform to a biblical precedent (the ark and the cross, for example) and body-part reliquaries. Throughout her book, Hahn provides keen insights into the material, production and display of relics and their containers (as well as the related issue of their visibility). Most significantly, she shows how the manipulation of this material over time affected the meaning of these objects for their viewers. Hahn argues for the shifting meaning and functions of reliquaries after 1204 with the Sack of Constantinople and subsequent influx of relics into western Europe, and thus choses this

as the end-date of her study. Given these parameters, this book should be read as a focused (if geographically and chronologically diverse) study rather than an overview of the topic. Much more, can — and hopefully will — be said about reliquary production outside of her scope, but Hahn provides a framework for such studies to consult. It is an important book that contributes not only to the study of medieval reliquaries but also more generally to the 'material turn' that has recently directed many studies of medieval art.[3]

Hahn divides her study into three parts. Part I ("First Things") introduces the major concepts and issues of reliquaries and considers the meaning of Early Christian examples. These issues include the relationships between relics, their containers, and their makers as well as the reasons for their production and later refashioning. The reliquary's material and its emphasis on materiality provide, Hahn argues, the key for understanding these objects. Having established these larger issues, Part II focuses on "shaped" reliquaries in forms of the ark, cross and body-part. It is here where Hahn employs the idea of metaphor and rhetoric to explain how these reliquaries create meaning. Finally, Part III explores how meaning is shaped not only through the forms of the reliquaries themselves, but through their function, location, and manner of display. In particular, she examines how reliquaries functioned during processions (where they

[3] See, among many others, Caroline Walker Bynum, *Christian Materiality: An Essay on Religion in Late Medieval Europe* (New York: Zone Books, 2011); "*Res et significatio*: The Material Sense of Things in the Middle Ages**"** ed. Aden Kumler and Christopher R. Lakey *Gesta* Special issue, Vol. 51, No. 1 (January 2012), pp. 1-17; Anderson, Christy, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith. *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250-1750*. 2015.; Karen Overby and Benjamin C. Tilghman, "Active Objects: An Introduction" *Different Visions: A Journal in New Perspectives on Medieval Art* 4 (2014): 1 – 9. Available http://differentvisions.org/active-objects-an-introduction/; Karen Overby, "Seeing through Stone: Materiality and Place in a Medieval Scottish Pendant Reliquary" *RES* 65/66 (2014/2015): 243 – 258; Beyond medieval art, see multi-authored discussion in *Art Bulletin* "Notes from the Field: Materiality" *Art Bulletin* 95 (2013): 10 - 37.

removed from a static context into a highly changeable one), in contrast to their display in the treasury (where they must be understood not only for their own qualities but in response to other objects on display). This examination provides a much-needed context for understanding the multiple and co-existing meanings of reliquaries and one only wishes Hahn would have expanded upon this section. These three parts generally provide cohesion for the book as a whole, and support her goals better than the methodological use of semiotics, which tends to overcomplicate the concept of relics as metaphors.

Hahn introduces her book through the example of the *Staff Reliquary of Saint Peter*, examining the demands made on the spectator due to the double sacrality of the image. This sacredness is linked not only to the founder at Trier, but also through the material itself, as the reliquary acts as a representation of the relic. The staff reliquary thus becomes a way for Hahn to introduce the essential questions she wishes to address

Staff Reliquary of St. Peter. Gold, gems, enamel, pearls. Limburg (Lahn) Cathedral Treasury. Photo: Wikimedia

on the subject of relics and the ways in which they make the hidden visible. She argues that the 'strange beauty' of her subject is authenticated through inscription, a topic she will return to in subsequent chapters.

Hahn then considers the earliest medieval reliquaries. She argues that, unlike later reliquaries, these early examples were both visible and hidden. Importantly, she calls attention to the revisionist history of relics and reliquaries as 'art objects' rather than the more complex objects that they actually were. This fact creates a sort of strangeness when viewing the reliquary – a sense of wonder as the mundane object transforms in the presence of the divine. This act thus reveals the power and purpose of the reliquary itself: to teach the viewer what a relic is and how to interact with it (p. 8). The reliquary's primary goal then is to focus attention on the *relationship* between the beautiful exterior and the ugly but precious interior. The interaction between these two components of the reliquary then draws attention to the power of materials and the important role of the artist. Early reliquaries, for example, were not always narrative, but rather the shape became a metaphor for revealing their interior contents. Shapes such as crosses, purses, heads and arms allowed for ritual connections to the liturgy and allowed for new meanings to emerge. Here, Hahn makes an interesting point about the cross reliquary in particular, arguing for its function as both icon and index, thereby bringing forth important questions regarding reliquaries and the concept of medieval copies and originals (p. 75). The interaction between reliquaries in the treasury thus calls to mind the interaction of saints in Heavenly Jerusalem.

Strange Beauty provides several important contributions to the study of relics. Her careful consideration of the changing nature of relics from souvenir to container of the

holy is framed by a discussion of categories of ‘art’ and the complicated desire to understand these objects in the past and present (p. 9). Her emphasis on the social relationship of the relic and the reciprocal act of viewing is especially well-considered and provides critical context for these works that is not studied as often as it should be. Hahn’s employment of semiotics is also an innovative, if not always helpful, approach to considering these relics in terms of rhetorical devices. While I found her discussion of *ekphrasis* and reliquary inscription convincing, the use of metaphor as a way for understanding the fragmentary and multiple connotations of relics did not always make her argument clearer and leaves the reader with too-little context for the appropriate application of literary terminology. Despite this shortcoming, her subsequent discussion of performance and display of relics provides, in my opinion, the most important contribution of her book. Rather than static objects, Hahn understands their portability as a key aspect of their power. Equally well-considered is her discussion on visuality and the nature of the concealed and revealed relic. Conceiving of seeing as a taught and constructed device frames her assessment of cross reliquaries before 1204 and the importance of the sack of Byzantium in both a historical and theoretical manner that lends itself to a convincing reading of the massive change in reliquary function and meaning after the Fourth Lateran Council.

While *Strange Beauty* overlooks some significant categories of relics, it stands as a major study in the field and is worth a serious read. Since *Strange Beauty*, more literature has engaged with concepts of reception, materiality, metaphor, and performance, demonstrating the continued relevance of this approach. As important as this work is to the study of relics, it is Hahn’s approach to the complexities of material

culture that will provide the greatest appeal to a wide range of scholars and students, both within and beyond medieval studies. ❧